

CHAPTER 6

(1985 – 1988)

Losing The Lot

There is a theory that suggests, ‘We are where we are because we choose to be there’. I believe this is only partly true. Our position in life is often not necessarily what we want; it is however, a direct result of choices we make and have control over. Sometimes we are unaware of the consequences of certain decisions until it is too late. After all, we only have control over our own choices and actions, not those of other people we interact with.

The first decision I made after parting company with Chris was to be the worst decision I ever made in my business life. It took less than two and a half years to blow up in my face and ruin my life for almost two decades.

I was of the belief that engineering companies operated better with business partners working together within a

corporate structure. Business partners are able to share the workload and responsibilities. It worked well for Chris and me and it seemed like a sound principle to continue. Being able to consult with a partner on the more complex technical matters had its advantages, and knowing the office and staff would be well managed during my absence on business trips and annual leave provided me with peace of mind. Architects feel reassured if, in the event of something unfortunate happening to the owner of the business, there is another person capable of completing their projects. Also, a professional business partnership should be able to resolve most potential problems.

After considering a number of candidates, one person stood out. The fact that I had known him for around eight years was encouraging. In 1975, following Cyclone Tracy in Darwin, I secured him employment with Barclay Brothers for the prefabrication of houses. At that time we were attending Eagle Farm TAFE for our Advanced Plumbing Certificate.

We had a lot in common. Both of us were raising young families and purchasing our own homes, and we both loved water sports. He was a former lifesaver and active member of a Gold Coast club. These were signs of stability, demonstrating an ability for him to take on responsibility. We also shared common interests in our desire for luxury items, although he was into antiques and I was definitely a modern item person. He would rather purchase an old pew from a church and use it for his dining seating, whereas I prefer an ultra-modern dining suite. We even shared our love of food and were both overweight.

During our time at the Eagle Farm College, now known as Gateway TAFE College, I valued his kindness and felt indebted to him. We often found ourselves locked in the

college grounds late at night after classes when the janitor had left early, his assistance allowed me to find my way along the path in the pitch dark, and climb over the perimeter fence to reach my car the car I shouldn't have been driving.

On reflection, there were signs of another side to his nature. A number of times throughout the course he asked to copy my assignments and then lodged them as his own. His excuse was always the same; his family, work and surf lifesaving commitments kept him busy. I provided the assignments because I appreciated the assistance he gave me. I eventually came to the conclusion that a person who doesn't do their own work is either lazy or doesn't know what they are doing. I felt uncomfortable with the arrangement, as I knew no act of kindness can justify cheating.

In reaching my decision to take him on as a partner I placed a lot of significance on his insistence that he wanted to become a good design engineer and an expert in mechanical pumps for water systems in high-rise buildings. Such pumping systems included fire protection, rainwater disposal and domestic water supplies. Complex calculations are required for these types of pumps to be correctly balanced. He convinced me that he was the person I needed.

We went ahead and became business partners. Because I trusted him, we never had a written contract or partnership agreement. We owned fifty percent each; therefore it didn't cross my mind that we should specify our roles and responsibilities. I thought my role as chairman and his role as secretary of the company were defined by standard company practices, and I didn't feel it was necessary to emphasise that important decisions must be discussed before being implemented. This seemed logical to me.

I am sure he was impressed with his fast trip to the top! In the period from 1979 to 1985, my new partner had progressed from being unemployed, to receiving a gift of a fifty percent partnership in a potentially leading engineering design company. Astonishing, from my point of view. No one ever did that for me! Good fortune was definitely shining on him and I am sure he realised the advantages of the material gains and prestige this new position gave him.

The part I am not sure he understood or appreciated was the corporate structure and the financial aspects of the deal. In 1985 his shares were valued at around fifty-five thousand dollars and on top of that he received an impressive salary package which included an unlimited expense account, an executive office and a top of the range four-wheel drive vehicle fitted with a car phone. Car phones were new technology and had only recently been released. I think the value my new partner placed on his corporate assets was equal to what he paid: zero dollars. Future events confirmed my suspicion that he didn't understand the real worth of his shares in the company.

During our first official partnership meeting, we spoke about our understanding of the company and what it needed to achieve and we put in place our direction for the next few years. I explained we had every reason to feel confident in the future; we had a modern office with modern equipment, plenty of work and professional staff. I went on to tell him that I could only guarantee ten years of my life to the company, after which time I would possibly move on and do something different. I realised my attention span was limited to that time frame, after which I had to find new challenges. Ten years was generous in my opinion. I also pointed out that it was important for us to make the partnership work, demonstrating stability

to our clients and the industry. Having been through one partnership split and a change of business name, it was unlikely we could survive a second. I was even more forthcoming in making the point, that if the business were not successful, neither of us would survive the fallout. The comments were intended to motivate him; in retrospect, I believe they actually intimidated him.

Life continued to be positive for me. I had a winning formula and there was no need for change. Even the daily struggle with my eyes was predictable; the difficulties I endured seem to be normal everyday events. It was not unusual for someone to ask where I got the bruises on my arms or legs, or even a scratch on my face. Rarely did I remember; it was just another incident, and when there are so many they fade into insignificance. I was focused on being an industry leader and proving to myself that the split with Chris was not a setback, but just another challenge to be overcome.

Realising I was obsessed with my work, and often labelled a workaholic, I continually looked for interests to bring balance to my life. Photography was an escape and it allowed me to include my family on enjoyable day trips throughout south-east Queensland, capturing landscapes and portraits with bush settings. In fact, I enjoyed photography so much I purchased a small camera shop in the local shopping centre. There I was again, mixing my pleasure with my work; I just couldn't help myself. Anyway, it turned out to have its share of difficulties.

I was on a steep business management learning curve. The results of some of my decisions left me wondering if I had been a passenger at Bristow Funnell and Partners rather than a driver. The photographic shop needed close daily hands-on management, which I was unable to provide

due to my commitments to the engineering company. I entrusted the job to a young camera enthusiast, believing he was up to the task. It quickly became obvious that he didn't have the same level of business skills that I had acquired during my years of study. I began to realise that, 'People do not know, what they do not know'.

Lorraine, a family friend, offered to assist me with the bookkeeping for the shop, suggesting it could be carried out in her spare time. What she omitted to tell me was she didn't have any spare time. The first month passed and there was no Profit and Loss Statement. The second and third months passed; still no company accounts. Business lessons were becoming an expensive part of my life and the cash flowed out faster than it was coming in.

Never again did I entrust the company books to unpaid assistance. Profit and Loss Statements are critical, particularly in a start-up business, which this was. Christmas was a good trading period, yet we ran out of cash. I demanded the books be returned to me and I took control. I sat at my computer every night for three weeks assessing the situation and projecting the cash flow for the coming months. Sadly it was too late. I found the bookkeeper had not been paying all the accounts, the wage book was non-existent and the cash flow projections my store manager had used were just out of dream time. My findings caused me to look deeper. How could the sales be up, accounts not paid, and there be no cash?

My investigation revealed the manager was giving away stock to the young girls he wanted to impress. This became evident during surveillance I carried out. I sat with a friend outside the shop, observing the manager's procedures while serving customers. It was difficult for me to see what was happening, but my friend gave me a commentary. We

observed that young girls went into the shop, collected their developed photos and left without paying. After one young lady exited the shop, I identified myself as the owner of the business and asked to see her payment receipt, which she was unable to produce, and admitted she never had to pay. The manager was lost for words when I raised the matter.

I also discovered a scam my manager was carrying out, which cost me thousands of dollars. He would purchase stock in conjunction with another camera shop. Each manager received an invoice for the full amount; they then charged both owners the full invoiced value, but only paid the supplier once, thus pocketing the extra money. This caused me to become suspicious of people and question everything I was told. The wary attitude which developed at that time eventually became an integral part of the person I am today. I handed the shop back to Pacific Photo Laboratories and my twenty-five thousand dollar investment was down the drain.

The demise of my relationship with Keryn was painful. We were growing apart and it didn't matter how we tried to be interested in each other's activities, we seemed to find it easier to be critical than constructive.

We talked about the 'What if?' and discussed the household items each would receive in the event of a split. Staying together until our children grew up may have been a sensible solution, but hardly a sound foundation to rebuild a marriage. Our home was debt free. Maybe it would have been better if we had been struggling financially. An achievement of financial security counted for little in the true love stakes. Keryn and I had to find a new direction for our marriage. We needed to give it a kick-start; an attitude change was required by both of us. We should have reminded ourselves what we loved about each other and

what it was we both wanted out of the marriage. Sadly, that never happened. Obviously, I must not have explained my needs to Keryn clearly, or she didn't understand them. It may have been that my needs were too difficult to accommodate. I know I didn't have a clue of what she wanted.

We were coming up to our fifteenth wedding anniversary and I had a few dollars spare. A second honeymoon sounded like it may be a solution to give us the necessary spice. Keryn jumped at the idea of a trip to Hong Kong. Shopping was foremost on her mind. She had heard correctly there were great clothing and jewellery bargains to be had. During the lead up, Keryn was like a kid at the candy store. In 1985, the Hong Kong territory was still controlled by Britain and it was considered to be one of the most exciting shopping destinations in the world.

My Uncle Essie, who owned the Niagara Café, Pharmacy and Gift Shop at Katoomba in the Blue Mountains, visited Hong Kong annually. It was his major shopping spree to purchase stock. We were to meet for dinner on our arrival. Landing at the old Hong Kong airport in a huge Jumbo Jet with over four hundred passengers was a most exhilarating experience. The pilot has to guide the plane between mountains into a narrow gap, which at night gave me the feeling that the well lit high-rise apartment buildings were lining the runway.

I learnt a lot that evening as I got to know my uncle better. I learnt that regardless of how much money one has, it is still the simple things in life that can give the most pleasure.

We met at an exclusive hotel restaurant. After settling in, I asked my Uncle Essie why he returned every year, considering neither he nor Aunty Edna were young and

visiting Hong Kong requires a high level of fitness to keep up the fast pace. It is a city for the young and energetic. “Paul ... Paul ... Hong Kong is the most exciting place I have found. Every time I return there’s something new, and it keeps us young.”

He leaned over to a bag sitting on the floor beside him and pulled out a new battery-operated toy that he found while poking around in an out of the way shopping centre. The toy was a sample for the variety section of his shop. He asked the waiter to clear the table for him to demonstrate it. I thought he was kidding. Not my uncle; he asked and he received. Childish? Absolutely childish, but it was fun. Here we were in an exclusive restaurant, playing with a toy. He then requested our table be reset for our main course.

The second honeymoon went well, although it never provided the romantic solutions I so desperately needed and had hoped for. Over the next two years the cracks in our relationship kept widening, and sadly we had three short separations, each being resolved with promises to each other that things would change. The fact is they didn’t change. It must have been more unsettling for Rebecca and Adam than I could ever have imagined.

It is my belief that every step in life’s journey is guided by a Higher Power and there is a good reason for everything that happens. This leaves little room for regret. There is however, plenty of room for disappointment, and two major disappointments that I have had to live with are that I put Rebecca and Adam through the pain of not having me there at a most important part of their lives, and the love they were deprived of when they needed it most.

When things got tough, as they often did, I retreated to the one place where I had control and no one ever dared to tell

me what to do, and where I was the king: the sanctuary of my office. I buried myself in work as it continued to come our way. The Hayman Island project provided a good escape for a day or two when things were getting on top of me. The professional fees and cash flow from the project helped during the rebuilding of the company. Forty level residential apartment buildings on the Gold Coast were successful commissions for our company, and were major projects, providing an opportunity for my new partner to gain experience. We soon opened an office in Southport, on the northern end of the Gold Coast, to cope with the increase in work.

Cairns was also thriving and with most of the large projects being given to our company, we opened our third office to cover the Far North Queensland region. There was a tourism and building boom happening and we were at the forefront of it. The company had grown to twenty-seven staff and three offices in less than eighteen months. We were the third largest company of our type in Australia and had enough young ladies under twenty-one years of age to field a netball team in the Brisbane competition.

Having a large staff meant there were plenty of problems to address, and all I did was move from one problem to the next. By late 1986 serious problems were starting to appear in the business relationship between my partner and me. I rationalised each situation and moved on. It was a time for me to demonstrate tolerance, a quality I didn't have in abundance. It is often suggested I don't suffer fools easily; it is more accurate to say, I cannot suffer fools at all. I had to remember the shoe could be on the other foot; my partner may one day have to tolerate the frustration of my limited eyesight, therefore I knew I must be understanding about his shortcomings, in particular his lack of design knowledge. It was not easy.

Everyone has their limit, we can only be pushed so far, and I had mine. I recall times when my partner aggravated me beyond comprehension. On one particular occasion, he took it upon himself to commit an act of sabotage contrary to everything our company stood for. What I now realise, is this was just one of many major differences we had. In the profession, it is standard practice and an act of courtesy, for engineering plans to be provided for a rival company where both are working on the same project. My former partner, Chris Bristow, exercised his right under our agreement to request a set of plans. I was happy to oblige.

In those days, building plans were drawn on tracing paper and if tracing paper becomes wet, it crinkles and is difficult to read. Unbeknown to me, my partner took the full set of tracings and placed them under a running tap, which effectively destroyed every drawing. He then hung them out to dry, and after sending them to Chris, told him the plans had become wet in a recent storm which had caused water to leak into our office. I was livid and would like to have killed him on the spot.

My partner was not one for working long hours, and I found myself developing an attitude of, 'Why the hell should I keep him?' Much to my surprise, he approached me and demanded to be given some prestigious projects rather than the smaller commercial buildings for which he was more suitable. I found his approach a little odd, as he had total control over the Gold Coast office, which had access to some of the best work available in Queensland. In the past forty years there has never been a downturn in building on the Gold Coast, and buildings have increased in height from forty levels to eighty; with fifty, sixty and seventy level structures being common. It is an engineer's paradise.

I decided to set my partner up in a sink or swim exercise.

I handed him control of our two most prestigious projects, Hayman Island redevelopment and Central Plaza, the latter being a twenty-five level office development in the heart of the Brisbane Central Business District. After explaining the jobs in detail, the following day I packed my family into the car, hitched the boat and headed north for two weeks to the Whitsunday Islands, where life doesn't get much better. That was enough time for both projects to land back on my desk, the attached note reading, 'Too bloody difficult; do them yourself'.

We were successful in gaining the commission for the second stage of John Paul College in Daisy Hill, which was only a short drive from our Springwood home. During the early construction I expressed to the Principal my desire for my children to attend the college. The fact that I was a member of the local Uniting Church appealed to him. The school was the first ecumenical high school in Queensland and they wanted families with a commitment to their religion. One afternoon I received a call from the college bursar requesting a meeting with the Principal.

The meeting took place and the principal asked me if I would consider the position of President of the Parents and Friends Association. He wanted it run as a business rather than a parents' club and he believed I was the person to make it happen. It was twelve months before Rebecca would enter high school and I was only too aware of the difficulties of enrolling children in private schools. In many cases, six year waiting lists were in place, and at the more exclusive schools, the parents were required to enrol their children at birth. The Principal's request for me to be president came with a wink and a nod. This was not enough for me; I wanted to hear him say both Rebecca and Adam would be accepted. I let him know I was able to deliver his request, however it would be difficult with my children attending

the local Springwood High School. I was then provided the guarantee that their enrolment application would be approved without complications.

The association soon grew from a handful of parents attending meetings, to around seventy. We raised two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the college that year and it grew from there. After only my third meeting, a business lady, Maria Finlay, introduced herself. She owned the Logan City Business Academy. Maria was a most attractive lady, tall and slim, with jet black, softly permed hair which was always immaculately groomed. She had arrived from Rhodesia three years earlier, after fleeing with her husband and daughter, Jacquelyn. They left their home when the African colony gained internationally recognized independence from Britain in 1980 and became the Republic of Zimbabwe. I was attracted by her business attributes: I have always enjoyed the company of business women.

A few days later, Maria phoned me at my office seeking a meeting. She was looking for ideas to promote her business academy and increase the student attendance. Her business was struggling and was not as it appeared to the public. "Welcome to the real world," I told her. "We're all in the same boat." She was comforted by the fact that she was not out there on her own.

Maria told me she was impressed by my organisational and business skills. The meeting took place in my office a few days later. We kept it above board and avoided anything that could start gossip. Everything went well and we arranged to keep in touch to assist each other where we could. I stood shaking her hand and my parting comment was meant only as a caution; I had no idea that one day it would ring true.

“Maria, if we are going to continue these business meetings, I think we need to be careful.” I was captivated by her beauty.

“Oh Paul, you do, do you?” I swear, her eyes twinkled.

“I may have very limited eyesight, but I am sensitive to what your eyes are saying.”

“Best we talk about it,” she said.

“Yes, my life has enough problems. I don’t need more,” I told her.

Over the coming months we enjoyed a business mentoring relationship, which allowed us to meet for lunches. Maria liked getting out of her suburban office and enjoyed the buzz of the city. We enjoyed meeting up at school functions and became good friends. We looked for opportunities to attend trade shows, although sometimes they were not relevant to either of us and we became bored quickly. There was always the movies to enjoy, or a coffee shop where we could sit and talk. We respected each other’s family situations and never crossed the line. It came to light that Maria’s marriage was in tatters, like my own. From stories she told me, I think her marriage was difficult due to experiences in their home country. Maria had carried a small gun in her handbag and never went anywhere without it, not even to bed! Their home had bars to keep the thieves out, and according to Maria, her husband became an active soldier in the war and had changed from the person she married. The way she saw it, they were now in a new country with new values. She spoke about breaking free and starting over.

By early 1987, everything was starting to blow up in my face and it was too difficult to juggle the daily problems between my business and home. My weight had blown out to 130kg through lack of exercise and poor diet. Maria tried to get me to slow down; she told me that all I seemed to do was go

from one problem to the next. It was true. She encouraged me to stop and take stock. I analysed my daily routine and my lack of quality of life. Maria was definitely right; I was employing engineers to do the work, and then spending my entire day fixing up their stuff-ups.

At our monthly staff meetings, I emphasised the importance of discipline and consistent design criteria, only to later find out my partner was telling the staff not to take any notice of me, just to let me rave on in the meetings then go about their work as usual. He even stated publicly that he had a habit of loading the gun and then letting me fire it when it came to sacking staff. If I once had any respect for him, it was totally diminished the day I was interviewing a young lady for a tracer's job. His comment about her was downright offensive. He called me out of the interview into his office and advised me to give her the job, his assessment based on the young lady's physical attributes rather than her ability to perform. He suggested she was right for the job because she had big knockers.

Daydreaming has always been an important part of my life, and still is. I discovered that while enjoying a quiet and tranquil place, I had the ability to transform my mind to experience a future event, just as if it were happening there and then. That is not to suggest I could tell the future, because I couldn't. But I could experience a situation and know how it would most likely play out, and how it would affect my deep and real emotions. I was able to have a sense of the outcome before it actually happened. Of course, not every detail would be evident: that is the beauty of life, we are never sure what the future holds. The transformation of my mind allowed me to live the experience at that present moment, even though it would not occur until some time in the future.

One of those situations was that, I didn't need to wait until my marriage broke up to know how I would feel. I was able to experience the loneliness of waking up in the mornings and returning home after work to a house without my family, which had been part of my everyday life for so long. I was able to live the difficulties of not being able to call on Keryn when I desperately needed assistance in the dark: the fearful sensation almost choked me. Even though it was not actually happening at the time, it may as well have been. My feelings would overwhelm me as I imagined that I was in situations I could not handle, due to my limited eyesight, with no one to look out for me. The thought of all these scenarios rolled into one became too much and I had to snap myself back to reality. The lessons that lay within these experiences were not easy to confront.

The most interesting of my trances involved imagining the future with no vision at all. I currently enjoy around five percent vision in the daylight, with one to two percent in some artificially lit areas, and zero in the dark. It is interesting, although I am able to achieve a projection of reality for most situations, I draw a blank and I am incapable of imagining what the future actually holds regarding the total loss of my sight.

Coping with life became more difficult each day. I was fed up with my business partner's incompetence. I could not work out what Keryn wanted, and the problems with staff continued. I found myself calculating what it would cost me in lost revenue, lost profits and retirement of debt to part company with my business partner. In 1987, I arrived at a figure of one hundred thousand dollars, which maybe I was prepared to sacrifice to be free of him. I carried out similar calculations should Keryn and I part permanently, but the figure was closer to five hundred thousand dollars. Regardless of how bad things seemed, my final decision

was to accept both situations as they were and try to fix the relationships. I abandoned any thoughts of parting company with either of them.

Effective communication has always been an integral part of my life; that is why I chose to be in Public Speaking. Both business and personal communications were a top priority. Neither my business partner nor my wife possessed any skills in this area, and they were not prepared to do anything about the situation. Each preferred to leave problems in the 'too hard basket'. I liked to tackle problems head-on and find solutions. I am sure this intimidated them, and Keryn often stated that she could not compete with me or present her case as effectively. Hell, it was a conversation, not a competition!

I really thought life was going to carry on as usual. My friendship with Maria gave me the stimulating conversations that I didn't have with Keryn and I toned down my expectations of our marriage, learning to accept things as they were. I had the ability to treat our relationship like a business: although I wanted out, the sound financial decision was to stay with it. The following weeks were confusing; balancing my loyalty to the family while not being happy, was difficult. Despite this, my decision was locked in; I was going to stay and learn to accept life as it was. I found myself defending my actions and justifying every move I made to Keryn. My life was a time bomb waiting to go off. And it did!

Maria phoned late one afternoon and asked for an urgent meeting. She had experienced a crisis that day which involved a government department and one of her students. She knew I enjoyed battling with the government and I had a reputation for winning against them. My forthrightness and lack of subtlety were well-known. On

many occasions I was told I was ‘as subtle as a dunny door in a gale’. I agreed to meet Maria later that night after an industry meeting I had to attend and she finished her night class. We drove to the local lookout. Being somewhat naïve, I didn’t realise the location was a local parking spot for young lovers. All I cared about was the amazing view of the lights from the high hill. With night blindness, everything else is black and the lights are a magnificent display. The thought of trying to hide my car never crossed my mind.

A family friend with his young children drove past. They were testing their new four-wheel drive and the steep hills leading to the lookout were ideal. He spotted my car, took a long look, and raced back to provide a full report for Keryn, based on his version. I arrived home and Keryn went berserk; she accused me of all sorts of things, even events I knew nothing about. Realising it was over and the time had arrived, I offered to move out permanently. The offer was rejected, and one hour later she took delight in telling me she was tossing me out. I was told to leave and never return. That night our eighteen year marriage came to an end.

Over the following months, Keryn sent me mixed messages. On occasions she vowed to ruin me and promised to make sure I never recovered from the fallout. This was one promise she achieved: she was not alone, she did have help, there were other influences that shaped the next two decades of my life. Sometimes it is better not to know what lies ahead, otherwise we may give up before we even start. On many occasions Keryn begged me to return, and even sent her mother to broker a deal. I think she sent the wrong person. Peg was a good mate of mine and still is today. Peg and I share the same philosophies about life; she was a hard worker and thrived on success and achievements. That morning we spent a long time talking, but very little was about my marriage to her daughter. Peg displayed

an understanding attitude and didn't take sides. I was dumbfounded when Peg suggested she was surprised the break-up hadn't happened years earlier.

On one occasion Keryn even visited my new home, offering to change and demonstrating she could be the loving wife. The trouble was, it came too late for both of us. That period of my life was traumatic and painful. I was no longer able to give Keryn the answers she needed and I was unwilling to make the necessary changes. It was not easy to walk away from the person I had loved and with whom I had invested fifty percent of my life. We had our chances and now life was moving on for both of us.

Keryn left the marriage financially secure for life and with a healthy cheque from me. I was devastated when the situation became nasty. We were never able to agree about anything, and even the children's education became an issue. Keryn limited my access to Adam. Access to Rebecca was immaterial, her relationship with me came to a sudden halt. I thought time would heal our differences, but it never did. Keryn had me in court at every possible opportunity. Receiving legal aid meant it was easy for her, but I had to pay my own costs, which didn't help my dwindling cash reserves. There were even times when I got landed with her solicitor's fees. For this reason it was cheaper to give in to her and just accept things as she wanted them.

I recall attending arbitration to gain the right to advise Adam on his selection of school subjects that would later influence his choice of career. Keryn argued that I was not a fit person to offer such advice and she also took advantage of the situation to bring up all the dirt she could on me. She felt no shame and never took any responsibility for her part in the break-up. Attending Family Law Court was a draining experience. In 1988, she used the law to punish

me at every opportunity. In fact the system was so bad that the government of the day should have been ashamed.

Being made to feel that I alone had caused the break-up took its toll on me and my life was very stressful. I found it difficult to concentrate at work and my partner was disturbed by the continual abusive calls I received at work. I decided Keryn could have every asset we had acquired, except the boat, which was of no use to her. I also agreed to take on the family debts and the responsibility of paying private school fees. My child support payments were five times that stipulated by law. I just wanted it all to go away.

In hindsight, I was a very foolish person. At the property settlement, she also walked away with the family home and furniture. The court ruled I had a better chance than she did of regaining my position in life, which turned out to be bullshit. The outcome had a devastating effect on me. Even today I am unable to hold a discussion on matters which involve family break-ups. It is impossible for me to watch a television show that portrays a man who is trying to do right by his children, being manipulated by a woman.

It didn't help my situation that within a few weeks of me leaving the family home, my friend Maria announced that she was leaving her husband and that we should share a townhouse. Sharing accommodation seemed like a good way to reduce costs. I had not seen our relationship as any more than a good friendship. I did express my concerns at her idea, but she insisted and would not take no for an answer. We soon become playmates and provided each other with the comfort we both so obviously needed. I must admit she did help me get through the tough periods.

We purchased a home in Daisy Hill not far from John Paul College. I really wanted to be sure Rebecca and Adam could

visit me when they wanted. At that time I was still hopeful that Rebecca would spend her weekends with me, but it was not to be. To this day I hold the opinion that Rebecca felt betrayed; but unless she tells me, I will never know and we can never make amends. She originally wanted to move in with me, probably she was unable to cope with the idea of Maria living in the house. There is no question I would have chosen Rebecca over Maria. However, Rebecca was only twelve and there was no doubt she was better off with her mother.

It was difficult to imagine my relationship with Maria being long-term; we both liked controlling situations and often clashed. We saw ourselves as playmates more than potential life partners. Maria was a very caring and extremely popular lady. She loved helping the needy, and there were plenty of needy young adults who attended her business college in the hope of gaining employment. Most did find a good job. Her obsession to improve their quality of life was one of those attributes which made her compellingly attractive to me.

I was always proud of my role in assisting Maria to build her business into a successful enterprise, although she was reluctant to give credit to other people. She felt that the head of an organisation deserved the credit, and in this case it was her. For a few years I believed I was the man behind the successful woman, until one day I entered her office and was blown away. I saw a photo of her on the desk with a caption reading, 'I am the wind beneath my wings'.

For me, my goal was to rebuild my life. What I hadn't counted on was my business partner's reactions to my ongoing battle with Keryn. A few weeks after our separation my partner and his wife invited me to their home for dinner and they expressed their appreciation for all I had done

for them. He openly admitted I gave him a job at a time when they were at a low point in their lives, and a business opportunity he had never expected. Of course, I felt good and expected that all would work out well, but it only made the events that were to follow even more unexpected.

My partner had expressed his desire to only work three days a week from 9.00am to 3.00pm, he wanted to spend more time with his children. My needs were the opposite; I had a desire to work seven days a week and make a bundle of money, which placed us a long way apart if we wanted a successful business. I devised a system to give us both what we wanted. The plan was to operate separate businesses under the same company banner. We would both receive payments from our clients separately, and then pay a set fee per month to our general account for overheads and office expenses. This allowed us to earn as much or as little as we liked. The trial lasted one month. It was obvious he would not survive. I deposited sixty-five percent of the fees to his thirty-five percent.

Around the same time Keryn, through her solicitors, demanded a valuation of the business. The business was valued at two hundred and eighty thousand dollars; very good for a couple of years work. Keryn was to receive sixty percent of my share in our property settlement, which meant I would have to raise eighty-four thousand dollars in cash to pay her out. That was never going to be possible. I had no hope, and I was unable to comprehend why she didn't have to pay the same proportion of the company debt. Her attitude to the business scared the hell out of my partner, who had images of losing his home by becoming tangled in my affairs. The structure of the company protected his interests, but it didn't seem to matter to him.

The crunch came early one evening. I was at Maria's

Springwood office helping her with a marketing plan. I had been out of my office all day, visiting the Hyatt Regency construction site at Coolum on the Sunshine Coast. It was around 7.00pm when I received my partner's phone call to confirm my location and requesting a meeting. I explained the timing was unsuitable and that we should meet in the morning. My partner insisted we meet immediately; waiting until the next day was not satisfactory. Thirty minutes later he strode into Maria's office as if he owned it, thrust a letter into my hand and marched out, leaving me wondering what had happened.

His letter advised me that he had taken control of the company, changed the locks on the doors and he wanted me to sign the enclosed resignation letter. I knew he meant business because the covering letter was on a solicitor's letterhead. 'What the hell is happening here?' I thought. 'What could be so bad that it can't be discussed in a professional manner?' I drove to the office that night. I was not happy; driving at night was a no-no. Sure enough, he had locked me out.

I was bewildered. I was the founding partner, and had invited him into the company. I was the chairman of the board and he was the secretary. How then could I be tossed out? Why did he not offer his resignation, leave the company and start his own business? It was a confusing situation. The next morning I arrived for work as usual, but the staff avoided me and refused to work with me. I quickly realised it was time for 'Plan B': close him down. Being chairman and having fifty percent of the shares didn't mean a damn thing. The situation was changing by the hour as we entered a war zone. I may not have liked what he was doing, but I loved the fight.

By 12.00 noon that day, seventeen hours after being

handed my notice, I had the company finances frozen. That afternoon I phoned every client who owed us money and requested they withhold payments for outstanding accounts until they received a joint advice signed by my former partner and me. Over the years I had learnt that cash flow is like the blood in our veins; if the blood stops flowing we die, and cutting off the cash in a company meant the demise of the business.

The correspondence from my partner's legal advisers indicated he was petrified and was trying to work out solutions. There was now a real risk of him losing his home. Good! It didn't bother me one little bit. We also had a one hundred thousand dollar line of credit with a finance company, which coincidentally had its own problems, and they exercised their option to call in the loan. Of course we didn't have that amount of money to give them, and the company was stuffed. It went from being a good asset with a respectable cash flow, to being a liability, all in a few weeks. It can happen that quickly.

With Maria's help, I mailed letters to the architectural and developer clients informing them the business had changed its name to Funnell Hydraulic Consultants and that my partner was no longer involved. This helped me maintain momentum, and little ground was lost. I had sent a positive message and they appreciated it. I wanted to make sure any news from my former partner was secondhand, and it was. To this day I can't be sure exactly what triggered his decision and the events that followed. But then, it is of little consequence.

If ever I felt a failure it was during that period. My family life was gone and my business was destroyed. Doom and gloom was all I could visualise. Oh, how quickly I lost my 'I can conquer all' attitude! I believed there would be no

triumphant comeback, just survival. As the dust settled, I found my losses were just over three hundred thousand dollars in assets and I was stuck with around one hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of debt. I thought I was finished; the task of rebuilding seemed too daunting.

My Fairlane car had been repossessed through the closure of the company, this shamed me. I had never had a vehicle repossessed in my life, and the day I drove to the dealer and handed over the keys, destroyed me for a long while. This had to be the lowest point of my life, or so I thought. I was not to know I would sink even further. My Maker gave me a lesson in humility I will carry with me for the remainder of my life.

For the next twelve months I walked to and from work and used public transport. Even though I was able to earn good fees from my engineering commissions, I had to meet the support payments for Keryn, my own living expenses, my share of the company debt and maintain the day to day running expenses for the new business. The debts were not allowable tax deductions as they belonged to a company I no longer owned. While there was no legal obligation to pay them, I felt I had a moral obligation. Considering they had to be paid from company profit and not the running expenses, it took a very long time to clear the debts. I made around twenty thousand dollars profit per year and from this the company tax had to be paid: the result equated to twelve years to clear the debt. At times it was very tough. On occasions I caught a taxi to visit clients, and if I couldn't afford one, I walked.

Many mornings I walked the four kilometres to work along the riverside walkway, I didn't have the one dollar train fare. I'd miss lunch to save money, which didn't do me any harm; I managed to lose 30kg over the following two

years. To maintain the image of a successful businessman, I often caught a taxi to the clients' offices, then walked several kilometres back to my office. It was extremely uncomfortable, dressed in business attire.

I knew the truth; I had lost everything. My work took me to different parts of the city, and I saw desperate homeless people who were much worse off than me. I thought I may only be a short step away from joining them. At the time I was not aware that it was, in fact, a giant step and I still had a contribution to make to society; it just wasn't clear to me what that contribution was.

Fortunately, my job also took me into the boardrooms of the most successful architectural and engineering companies, which provided a daily reminder of where I wanted to be. I maintained my lecturing position at the Queensland University of Technology, which placed me in front of energetic, forward thinking, young, students who looked up to me as their teacher. I could never have let them down. To keep my pride and self-esteem, I made sure this environment didn't change and I surrounded myself with constant reminders of what life would one day be like again. I continually visualised where I wanted life to take me.

On one hand, I could see where I could end up. Time and time again I stood looking at derelicts and would recite out loud, 'There, but for the grace of God, go I'.

I knew I had to get the monkey off my back.